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Failure of self regulation of UK alcohol advertising

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Alcohol advertising: the last chance saloon

Although the content of alcohol advertisements is restricted, **Gerard Hastings and colleagues** find that advertisers are still managing to appeal to young people and promote drinking

Research has established that alcohol advertising,¹⁻³ like that for tobacco⁴ and fast food,⁵⁻⁷ influences behaviour. It encourages young people to drink alcohol sooner and in greater quantities. From a public health perspective, advertising of alcohol should clearly be limited. The United Kingdom has opted for a system of self regulatory controls that focuses primarily on the content of advertisements, with some limitations on the channels that can be used. This is overseen by the Advertising Standards Authority, through the Committee of Advertising Practice, which represents the interests of advertisers, agencies, and media owners.

As part of its alcohol inquiry, the House of Commons health select committee wanted to explore the success of self regulation. It obtained a large number of internal marketing documents from alcohol producers and their communications agencies in order to examine the thinking and strategic planning that underpin alcohol advertising and hence show not just what advertisers are saying, but why they are saying it. Here we present the key insights to emerge.

Selection of documents

Because alcohol advertising is so extensive (around £800m (€900m; \$1.3bn) a year)⁸ it was not possible to examine documents from all relevant companies. Requests were therefore sent to only four producers, chosen for their profile, and their respective communications agencies; and they were asked to send documents relating to just five brands out of the dozens on their books for 2005-8 (table). We analysed the documents on behalf of the committee.

Although the sample is small, the requests resulted in thousands of pages of paper documents and nearly three gigabytes of electronic ones. These comprised contact reports between client and agency, client briefs, creative briefs, media briefs, media schedules, advertising budgets, and market research reports (box 1 on bmj.com).

We conducted a thematic analysis of the documents. We initially looked at four themes that are banned by the advertising code of practice (box 2) as well as sponsorship and new media.

Targeting and appealing to young people

Upcoming generations represent a key target for alcohol advertisers. Although the documents mainly refer to this group as starting at the legal drinking age (18 years), this distinction is sometimes lost. Thus market research data on 15 and 16 year olds are used to guide campaign development and deployment,^{w5 w6} and it is clearly acknowledged that particular products appeal to children (Lambrini, for instance, is referred to as a “kids’ drink”^{w7}). Many references are made to the need to recruit new drinkers and establish their loyalty to a particular brand: WKD, for instance, wants to attract “new 18 year olds,”^{w8} and Carling takes a particular interest in the fact that the Carling Weekend is “the first choice for the festival virgin,” offering free branded tents and a breakfast can of beer.^{w9}

Campaigns aspire to be associated with and appeal to youth: Smirnoff Ice wants to “become the most respected youth brand (overtaking Lynx [deodorant]).”^{w10} New media channels are used because they will appeal to and engage young people, and Lambrini’s 2007 television campaign set out to be “a cross between mspace and High School the [sic] Musical.”^{w11}

University students are another focus. A Smirnoff presentation says, a “great place to create excitement and drive recruitment is within the student community,”^{w12} and Carling wanted a “greater focus on students as a core recruitment audience.” Carling’s aim turned into a proposal to produce a magazine for first year students—including those at Scottish universities, where a significant proportion of freshers are under the legal drinking age.

Sources of documents studied

Producer	Brand	Communications agency
Beverage Brands	WKD (an alcopop)	Big Communications Bray Leino PR Five by Five (digital)
Diageo	Smirnoff vodka	AKQA JWT
Halewood International	Lambrini (a perry) Sidekick shots	BJL Cheethambell JWT
Molson Coors Brewing Company	Carling	Beattie McGuinness Bungay (BMB)

Attitudes to drunkenness and potency

Advertisers are well aware that some groups drink irresponsibly. Brand strategy documents and campaign briefs abound with references to unwise and immoderate drinking.^{w14-w16} Far from regretting or avoiding any promotion of this behaviour as the codes require, producers and agencies analyse it for market opportunities. Thus Lambrini’s qualitative research with young women provided respondents with stimulus themes such as “getting pissed,” “one night stands,” and “drinking games” to help them discuss their experiences with the product (figure). Increasing consumption is a key promotional aim, contradicting the claim that the intention is simply to encourage brand switching (box 3 on bmj.com).

Drunkenness is also linked to high alcoholic strength—any reference to which is forbidden by the codes. Yet Smirnoff has worked out that “potency can be communicated in a number of ways,” including by reference to the drink being “ten times filtered or triple distilled,” noting that “for consumers both result in increased purity and therefore increased strength.”^{w21} This theme was given heavy coverage on the Smirnoff website.^{w22}

Association with social success

Advertisers are not allowed to suggest that alcohol can enhance the social success of either an individual or an event—yet the documents are full of references to brands doing both things. Thus Carling is described as a “social glue”^{w23} by its promotion team, and the brand overtly seeks to “own sociability,” as this is the way to “dominate the booze market.”^{w24} Lambrini is described as a “social lubricant”^{w25} in a creative brief for a summer campaign, and the “brand key” for the product, produced in 2008, positions it as “the perfect start to the night,” with the promise that the drink is “the best way to make your night light, bubbly and full of flavour.”^{w26} Similarly, the most important message for WKD to convey to consumers is that the brand “is all about having a laugh with your mates.”^{w27}

Efforts are also made to associate brands with personal transformation and enhancement.

Masculinity and femininity—Advertising must not link drinking with enhanced attractiveness, masculinity or femininity, nor with daringness, toughness, bravado, challenge, seduction, sexual activity, or sexual success.

Similar sexual stereotypes and appeals are found in campaigns aimed at women. In 2006, Lambrini also teamed up with Pretty Polly tights to run a promotion to find the “Lambrini girl” with “the UK’s sexiest legs.”^{33 34}

Sponsorship is not explicitly covered by the codes, so producers can take advantage of the resulting regulatory ambiguity, as box 4 shows.

Lambrini sponsors *Coleen's Real Women*, a reality television show in which Coleen Rooney searches for “everyday women to feature as the faces of major brands.”^{w39} This was broadcast on ITV2 despite the fact that Mrs Rooney was only 23 at the time (and therefore could not have been used in a conventional advertisement) and the regulator’s warning that it was “very likely to breach the Code.”^{w40}

One producer recognised that this presents a dilemma. An evaluation of Smirnoff's Facebook^{w42} presence showed that almost three quarters of members of Smirnoff related groups belonged to groups where there is a significant



bmj.com archive

- Review. Inside Saatchi & Saatchi (2005;330:426)
- Podcast. New problems, old problems (podcasts.bmj.com/bmj)
- Blog. "Mr Teetotaler" by Joe Collier (blogs.bmj.com/bmj)

doc2doc.bmj.com

Doctors on doc2doc, BMJ Group's online global clinical community, are discussing banning advertising, minimum pricing, and fining drunk patients



Box 5 | Hidden messages of Carling's "belong" advertisement

The advertisement featured a flock of starlings that gradually came together to reveal the word belong in the Carling logo. The Advertising Standards Agency received complaints from professionals and the general public that the advertisement breached the code but rejected them saying that it "did not imply alcohol contributed to the popularity of an individual or the success of a social event"^{w45}

Analysis of Carling documents supports the complaint^{w46}:

The pitch is described as: "Carling celebrates, initiates and promotes the togetherness of the pack, their passions and their pint because Carling understands that things are better together," which splits into "3 Aspects of Belonging":

- Initiation: Expressions of the moment when an individual joins a group and finds a happy home in the pack—the moment of belonging



- Celebration: An expression of the sheer joy of belonging
- Contagion: An expression of the magnetic power of the group—the power of belonging

A document describing the underpinning of the marketing strategy states "Broadly speaking each piece of communication will either celebrate 'Join Us' by championing the benefit of togetherness or facilitate 'Join Us' by providing and enhancing experiences where togetherness is key."^{w23}

Box 6 | Proposals to protect children and young people from alcohol advertising

- Billboards and posters should not be located within 100 m of a school
- A 9 pm watershed should be introduced for television advertising. Cinema advertising for alcohol should be restricted to films classified as 18
- TV and radio advertisements for alcohol should be restricted to a maximum of 25% of total advertising and no more than two alcohol advertisements should appear in one commercial break
- No medium or event should be used to promote alcohol if more than 10% of its audience or readership are 10-17 years of age
- Alcohol promotion should not be permitted on social networking sites
- Age restrictions should be required on any website that includes alcohol promotion—this would cover sites of those receiving alcohol sponsorship and corporate alcohol websites
- Efforts should be made to limit the promotion of alcohol on university and college campuses

risk of breaching the company's internal marketing code (for example, as a result of depicting or encouraging irresponsible drinking); nevertheless, Smirnoff continues to do all it can to boost its presence on the site. Others are less reticent and welcome the fact that new media "will allow us the most creative freedom,"^{w43} and give access to "'Young and Energised' consumers who engage in new technologies and gadgets."^{w44}

Inadequate regulation

The documents we analysed show that attempts to control the content of alcohol advertising have two systemic failings. Firstly, the sophisticated communications and subtle emotional concepts such as sociability and masculinity that comprise modern advertising (and sponsorship) often defy intelligent analysis by the regulator, especially when the thinking and strategising that underpins them remain hidden (box 5). Secondly, producers and agencies can exploit the ambiguities in the codes and push the boundaries of both acceptability and adjudication.

The second problem of pushing the boundaries

is illustrated by Lambrini's tenacious attempts to retain the strapline "Girls just wanna have fun" in the face of repeated advice from the regulator that it was "targeting young girls, and promotes getting pissed" and was "unacceptable."^{w46} Only when the strapline appeared in newspaper coverage of the death of a young woman in an incident that occurred after she had been drinking Lambrini did the company consider disassociating themselves from it.

Tightening the rules

The UK needs to tighten both the procedures and scope of the regulation of alcohol advertising. In terms of procedures, regulation should be independent of the alcohol and advertising industries, matching best practice in other fields such as financial services and professional conduct. In addition, young people should be formally involved in the process—the best people to judge what a particular communication is saying are those in the target audience. Finally, all alcohol advertisements should be vetted, not, as at present, just those for broadcast.

Turning to scope, sponsorship must be covered by the regulations, and digital media should also come under much greater scrutiny. In addition, particular efforts should be made to protect children from alcohol advertising (box 6).

The current problems with UK alcohol promotion are reminiscent of those seen before tobacco advertising was banned, when attempts to control content and adjust targeting simply resulted in more cryptic and imaginative campaigns. Indeed David Abbott, a leading advertiser of the time, argued that the codes were in fact acting as a stimulus, not a constraint, on creative imagination and that the only solution was an outright ban. History suggests that alcohol advertisers are, appropriately enough, drinking in the last chance saloon.

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